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ABSTRACT

Causes for optimism in attitudes about education include the growing maturity of educators about the inter-connectedness of things, the increasing realization of the revolution in fairness that presently permeates the society, and a growing impatience with laxity in education. Schools are striving for educational equity, improved inservice teacher education and professional development, and more support services. Administrators, teachers, and parents are realizing and accepting their responsibilitites in the educational process. A growing maturity, an unwillingness to be intimidated, and the recognition that complexity is negotiable are qualities that contribute to an optimistic outlook for the future. (CMJ)

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EDUCATION IN THE EIGHTIES:

THE CASE FOR OPTIMISM

Remarks prepared for Subcommittee on Elementary, Secondary and Vocational Education, Washington, D.C., December 1979

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Things educational have gotten bizzare in their complexity. Let me carry you back a half-century.

I grew up in the Newton, Massachusetts school system. Samuel Paul was the Principal of the Mason School-- the elementary school that dominated the very center of Newton Center. I have no idea how frequently Samuel Paul saw his superintendent or what they discussed. But I had the feeling as a child that Samuel Paul was to Mason School what I then believed King George V was to Buckingham Palace or what Calvin Coolidge or Herbert Hoover were successively to the White House: Lord of all they surveyed. If we pupils caused trouble, we were sent to Mr. Paul's office. Normally he was a kindly fellow with a shiny bald head. But he could be a terror. He had a nervous habit of hitching up his pants with his elbows while simultaneously harrumphing. This was always a prelude to his "Wrath-of-God" act which, in the worst cases, involved a ruler across the knuckles or a belt strap across the rear end. He frequently visited classrooms and stood pensively in a back corner surveying the pedagogic scene and making mental notes of the ambience. Occasionally pupils overheard him lecture a teacher on tardiness or lack of preparation. The Mason school always seemed prosperous. It was orderly. Truants were harshly dealt with. Acts of disrespect or violence were tantamount to

suspension or dismissal by Mr. Paul's edict. Homework was expected and parents as well as kids were held accountable for its being done on time.

There was no federal aid; no handicapped or OSHA regulations; no privacy laws; no court rulings on behalf of pupils' due process; no unions; no school closings; no drugs (although occasionally there were traces of cigarette smoke in the boys' john); no affirmative action regulations; no unexcused absences; no community advisory councils; no decremental budgets and consequent teacher lay-offs; no eighth-grade pregnancies. Aside from an annual visit by the Mayor, an annual patriotic presentation by the local Commander of the American Legion on Memorial Day, periodic vaccinations by visiting nurses, and the saving-stamp machine of the Newton Center Savings Bank in the school foyer, there was almost a complete sense of school self-containment. We saw cops at crossings but never inside the building. The Fire Chief gave a safety talk once a year to the teachers, but this always seemed to us a pretty dull affair because the Chief wore an officer's cap and well-polished black shoes instead of the battle helmets and clumpy rubber boots that made warrior firemen contemporary embodiments of King Arthur's knights.

Perhaps most important of all, there seemed to be a general expectation that learning was important, that schools existed to stimulate it, and that all kids would master at least the three R's

by the end of the eighth grade. After that--as God had obviously willed--Italian kids would some day become day laborers; Irish kids would go to the technical high school and finally become mechanics, truck drivers or politicians, and the rest of us would go to a classical high school followed by Dartmouth or, in the case of a few intellectual females,Mt. Holyoke.

It was a marvelously ordered class system agreed to, at least tacitly, by almost everyone. All the time I was in the Mason School there was only a single black. Her name was Almira Samuda. In Miss Morgan's first grade class I called Almira a "nigger." Miss Morgan talked to me severely and sent home a note. I was smartly spanked because according to my father I had been unkind--at the time a slightly perplexing if memorable event. The next day I told Almira Samuda I was sorry. So much for middle-class race relations in Newton, Massachusetts in the early 1920s.

Although I was not aware at the time I have been aware since that the 1920s were years of business optimism, behavioral experimentation, speakeasies, and national smugness. This was before the national humiliation of the great depression and the heady and sophomoric notion that big government could fix all things. It was before the searing tragedies of World War II, Korea and Vietnam; before the apex of faith in science and education in the 1950s and 1960s, and the shattering of that faith in the

late '60s and '70s--a faith shattered by the growing realization that what is essentially wrong with us is a moral and intellectual flabbiness and a resource profligacy that can be cured only by self discipline, by creative and productive efforts, and by a new sense of social responsibility.

It is scarcely to be wondered that Cassandras dominate the present mood of America and our present educational system. We have ground out a lot of history in the past five or six decades--and much of it has been sullen (wars, depressions, profligacy, inflation, terrorism, energy crises, run-away technology). We are now caught up in the ebbtide of the great waves of faith in education and in knowledge itself that hit its peak in the mid '60s.

But if we were then too buoyant, too sure, too optimistic, we are surely too discouraged, too doubtful, too pessimistic now. We should take pride and comfort in what we have learned in the past several years. Furthermore, there are new green shoots coming out of every nook and cranny of the world if we only take the pains to look carefully.

What of lasting value have we learned from the experience of the past several decades?

First of all, we have learned that distant events have proximate effects. American Presidents do not chase around to Vienna and Tokyo and Mexico City for the fun of it. They go to

those exotic places because that is where the important action is--action that will mightily affect the health and well being of Americans in New Orleans, and Seattle, and Hiram, Ohio and Columbia, Missouri. Similarly, educators' links (directly or indicrectly) to state capitals and to Washington, D.C. have increased a thousand fold in the past twenty years. Unlike some school people earlier in the century, educational administrators are not Lord of all they survey. What they do is conditioned and shaped by a hundred distant influences: court decisions, federal laws and regulations, reporting requirements of state education departments, state-wide minimum competency laws, state and national bargaining rules, state tax laws and referenda. If educators are not to be victimized by these distant forces, they have to play the educational game as American Presidents play the international game. They have to figure out ways to influence influentials in distant settings. Occasionally they have to use a hot line to their professional associations.

If educators have really internalized these propositions of connectiveness, they have learned one of the major lessons of our time. The crisis of maturity in a profession is not unlike the switch from adolescence to adulthood in individuals. Suddenly, life is cluttered with consequential relationships that extend in ever widening concentric circles to distant horizons. It is a world, as Michael Oakeshott once reminded us, "inhabited by others besides ourselves who cannot be reduced to mere reflections of

our own emotions."

So Optimistic Proposition #1 is that we are growing up. Educators are far less likely to be caught by Starwar surprises emanating from other political and administrative galaxies that they were even a few years ago. If their distant-early-warning-radar screens and their political laser beams need further perfecting, at least they recognize the problem.

Second, with all of the taudry complexity of modern bureaucratic life in education, some extraordinary things have happened in the past three decades that only the least generous among American educators could rue. The fact is that the hard shell of caste and class that had existed since Colonial times in large parts of our nation has been cracked beyond repair in the last quarter of a century. However far we as a nation still have to go, minorities, women, the young, the old, and the handicapped, are finally being brought, in Winston Churchill's great words, "under the protective umbrella of the Constitution." This extraordinary happening--the explosive extension of the concept of fairness in our society--is fraught with unpredictable, uncomfortable, sometimes bizzare consequences. It affronts the comfortable--often hidden--class system that in older days offered ditch-digging to Italians and Dartmouth to WASP's. But it is an extraordinary moral triumph. It changes the definition of schooling from sorting to universal opportunity. That the in-baskets and

telephone lines of educators are loaded with clinical problems related to the implementation of the new equities should be viewed by them as a kind of mid-wifery. In the context of considerable pain, blood, and anguish, they are helping a new world--a new freedom--to be born.

This seems to me a second cause for optimism--even though the struggle will at times be sufficiently attenuated to dull one's sense of immediate accomplishment.

Third, I cannot help but feel that we are coming to the end of a decade of educational slobbery. Standards are once again becoming respectable. Whatever the perversities of decremental budgets--fewer real bucks next year than last--they can be used to separate the frivolous from the serious in curricular offerings. I am not referring here only to the back-to-basics movement--basics defined in terms of the traditional three-R's. There are, in fact, some very worrisome aspects to this movement. Unless we are careful, we can turn out high school graduates who have been trained to recognize words, manipulate numbers, and write a simple declarative sentence, but who are completely incapable of a level of thought, feeling, and action needed for personal and social survival in the twenty-first century. The new concern with standards should infuse and infect <u>all</u> learning in <u>all</u> courses at <u>all</u> levels--in the arts and literature, in math and consumerism,

in history and social studies, in science and language, in physical education and vocational education. For those educators faced with a high degree of turbulence and violence and disrespect in their schools--conditions that presently preclude learning of any kind, the thought of raising standards in the near future may seem fanciful and Quixotic. But there is a growing public impatience with deviant behavior, and a growing willingness to try new combinations of humane discipline, occupational carrots, and national service to give young people a heightened motivation to take schooling seriously.

These, then, seem to me causes for optimism: the growing maturity of educators about the inter-connectedness of things, their increasing realization of the revolution in fairness that presently permeates our society; and a growing impatience with laxity, in all walks of life, but especially in education.

But are there evidences that schoolmen and women are acting on the basis of these triple manifestations of optimism? There are indeed. Here is a sample of what is happening--some of the green shoots that are coming up all around us.

First of all, there is good news about the educability of poor kids--especially blacks and Hispanics. For a dozen years we heard little but doom and gloom from those who reviewed the evidence on compensatory education. The Coleman Report; the

writings of Jencks, Moynihan, and others; the findings of Jensen; the Westinghouse study on Head Start; the MES Evaluation in New York City; and a myriad other analyses seemed to prove that low-achieving minorities do not respond educationally to the infusion of new money and new pedagogic stratagems.

In July 1978, the National Institute of Education issued a mammoth study of compensatory education. The study found, mirable dictu that federal money targeted on poor children actually went to where poor kids lived: central cities, rural areas, and places with high proportions of minority group children. Although Title I constitutes 3 percent of all spending on elementary and secondary education on a national level, it may account for a third of the funding in the very poorest school districts.

But so what? Has this additional and targeted money made any difference in learning? NIE's findings document that compensatory instruction can have a considerable effect on learning. Overall results show that aided children made significant achievement gains. First graders in the study made average gains of twelve months in reading and eleven months in mathematics during a seven month period. Title I is not effective everywhere but the results do indicate that school districts can create the conditions necessary to make compensatory instruction effective.

The NIE evaluation is buttressed by the seminal work of Benjamin Bloom and his associates at Chicago. In his experiments in "Mastery Learning" he and his colleagues have discovered that most children--all but the most severely mentally limited--can achieve criterion-referenced standards in basic skills if they are given suitable diagnostic services and remedial exercises.

As Patricia Graham has pointed out recently, we now know that the major culprit in the poor learning of the poor is not their genes, but family background, lack of expectations on the part of teachers and administrators for students to achieve, a curriculum that makes few demands on students, and inadequate demands on students to complete what they have been assigned.

Experiments all over the nation are providing cogent answers to these failures:

Item: Boise, Idaho develops a structured tutoring program using fifth and sixth grade students to tutor second and third grade learners. Empirical evidence indicates that math and reading skill deficient children can make major gains using trained student tutors.

Item: Minneapolis establishes basic skill centers for functional illiterates in grades 4 through 9. A multi-media approach is used including teaching machines and individualized instruction. Students make cognitive gains well above what would have been

expected for average children working at the reading levels of the measurement tests.

Item: Cleveland enriches and extends the school year for 1500 children from five elementary schools. The program includes teacher-parent conferences and special arrangements. Learning results: positive.

Item: The Guggenheim Museum in New York experiments with a childrens' program: learning to read through the arts. The program encourages individual creativity as well as proficiency in reading.

Item: The University of Pittsburgh R & D Center increases academic performances through the use of pupil self-evaluation--demonstrating that children can perform at a high level while sharing responsibility for managing their own behavior.

As John Gardner said, "Little bits and pieces of the educational revolution are lying around only waiting to be put together."

In the second place, there are other kinds of green shoots of a pedagogic nature. The work that Julian Stanley and others are doing with the mathematically gifted; the work of Patricia Krus and others in educating the mentally handicapped; the work of Ira Finkel in developing imagination and creativity in children;

Jeanne Chall's seminal work in the teaching of reading.

A check of references in ERIC or letters addressed to NIE will give educators scores of examples of fruitful and heuristic experiments that can be adapted and adopted in schools--helping educators to respond positively and creatively to insistent expectations of parents and taxpayers that schooling become more effective.

WCET-TV (not WKRP) Cincinnati has successfully articulated television and videotape with regular teaching to the enrichment of the curriculum and the improvement of student motivation and performance.

Third, there are increasing numbers of non-pedagogic, logistical, support-service green shoots. Take the case of the Timonium Elementary School in Maryland--the first school in the United States to be heated with solar energy. The experiment began on March 1, 1974. From March 1 to May 15 the wing of the school fitted out with solar equipment received 90 percent of its heat from the solar heating system. Over 1200 gallons of fuel oil were saved. Many professional journals in educational administration carry articles and announcements of similar developments: new ways to achieve fuel economy, new economy through central purchasing, more efficient and economical bus routes, etc. Alas, most of the time educators lack time, energy,

staff, or other resources to follow up on such leads, to adapt them, and to adopt them.

But this leads me to my most central cause for optimism. A point made earlier but something that needs underlining: an emerging sense that no one else is going to do it for the local administrator and teacher. For years local educators have assumed that committed parents, or the State Education Department, or the Ford Foundation, or the Federal government would bring manna from Heaven--and that there would be more manna mañana than today or yesterday. They know now, however, that resources are diminishing, that external aid brings regulation, that the winds of education are no longer at their backs.

Years ago Gordon Gray, then a high official in the Department of Defense, had on his desk a sign that read: "If I could kick the guy responsible for nine-tenths of my troubles, I would not be able to sit down for a week." Educators are now growing up. It is painful to live without the illusions of Santa Claus, and without the comfortable assurance that someone somewhere else can be viewed as the real villain. But there is a marvelous buoyancy in growing up--a knowing that if we fall off the bicycle it is mostly our fault. This does not imply that the stinginess and unreasonableness of others may not on occasion be contributing factors to the malfunctioning of our schools. It does not mean that

schools can suddenly and easily make up for the deprivations and angers that kids import from their homes and from the streets. It does mean, however, that teachers and administrators first search for creative answers rather than scapegoats. Sometimes creative answers involve transplanting green shoots from other experimental settings. Sometimes they imply a new initiative with a supervisor or a board. Sometimes they must take this form of calling up influentials in the State capital or Washington. Sometimes they involve going public on television and radio or in speeches to the Rotary Club explaining the probable or actual consequences of budget cuts or new tax laws.

Perhaps the most essential task is explaining patiently and systematically to parents, officials, and taxpayers what schools are for and what they can and cannot do.

During the Battle of Britain, Winston Churchill was once asked by an old lady in tennis shoes why Britain fought. He replied, "Madam, you would find out if we stopped." What if our public schools stopped? What if the buildings were all torn down and the administrators and instructional staff dismissed? They would be reinvented in a flash--to perform day care functions for working parents, to serve as civic centers and polling places, to provide cultural and competitive excitement in communities, and of course most essentially to give young people the intellectual skills and the career and aesthetic dexterities needed for coping,

for earning a living, for self-fulfillment, and for responsible citizenship. In recent years, schools have been given additional mandates: they have become health dispensaries, food dispensaries, racial laboratories, career counseling centers, adult education emporia, community gymnasiums. All of these are or can be rationalized as educationally related. But someone must explain that if budgets are cut year after year, school priorities must be set. Other institutions in the community can be asked to assume responsibility for some of the functions now being carried out by the schools. But no other institution in the community is capable of developing the cognitive functions which are the heart of the educational mission. This is what must be defended against all comers and against all peripheral claimants. Teachers and school administrators are the ultimate defenders of the faith--the faith in intellectual nurture, in the essentiality and the promise of the reasoning powers of Homo Sapiens.

The ultimate cause for optimism is not that our problems will disappear. Some will get worse. Some, like the battles over school closing, will largely dwindle and disappear by the middle of the '80s. But other grinding issues will take their place. The real cause for optimism is our own growing maturity, our unwillingness to be intimidated, our recognition that complexity is in fact negotiable. And educators will have help. The educational labor market in the '80s will be sufficiently soft so

that few appointments made to schools and school systems can all be Renaissance geniuses. Nevertheless, there will be extended periods of darkness.

Let me conclude with a story related to me some years ago by Joe Nyquist, the distinguished former Commissioner of Education of New York State. There was a famous dark day in New England in 1780 when the sun scarcely appeared at all. Thousands of people took it for the end of the world. Among them were many in the Connecticut Assembly in which Colonel Abraham Davenport was sitting. It was proposed that the Assembly adjourn. Colonel Davenport said, "The Day of Judgment is either approaching or it is not. If it is not, there is no reason for adjournment. If it is, I chose to be found doing my duty. I wish therefore that candles may be brought."

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